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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.

By D. J. SNIDER.

The main-spring of the action in "Merchant of Venice" is the contest between Antonio and Shylock. Every means culminates in this end, every incident contributes either to call forth their struggle, or to harmonize it after it has arisen. A glance at the leading events of the play will show that this is the one central point from which the entire action radiates, which organizes and vivifies the whole piece. The incidents relating to Portia, which at the first look seem somewhat remote from the main action, bring forth in fact the profoundest mediation of the drama. Bassanio loves Portia, and applies to his friend Antonio, the wealthy merchant, for the money to carry on his courtship in a suitable style of magnificence. For magnificent it must be, since it requires such a large amount of money, and besides it appears already to have exhausted his own purse. In this fact we see the motive for the account of this elaborate wooing; Shakespeare has brought before us lords and princes, with grand retinues, suing for the hand of the fair Portia; to compete with these, Bassanio has to apply to the merchant for the ducats. But the merchant's ventures are all at sea—he has not the cash on hand—hence he must go to the money-lender. This brings him into contact with the Jew, and the main circumstances of the play are thereafter rapidly developed. Thus Portia was indirectly the cause of Antonio's falling into the hands of the Jew; and hence the poet makes her the instrumentality by which Antonio is released. And even the incidents of the last act, which take place after the culmination of the play, are logically necessary for the harmonization of the lesser contradictions which have been called forth by the grand struggle. Every part must be rounded off with the perfection of art; no shreds are left to draggle from the edges of this well-wove garment; our poet is like the sculptor, who finishes the finger-nail as exquisitely in its way as he does the face, the expression of intelligence.

But the question next arises, What do these two men represent? What principles does each one maintain? For men

without a grand motive lying at the basis of their action, and giving color to their endeavor, can have no interest for us. It is the conflict of these principles, represented and carried into execution by men, that excites our sympathy, our fear, our delight. The first thing which we find much stress laid upon, is that Shylock is a Jew, a circumstance which should excite our careful consideration. The poet evidently intends to portray the Jewish character, or rather the Jewish consciousness. Antonio's religion is not specially dwelt upon; but he is, of course, a Christian, as well as those around him. The Jew thus finds himself in a Christian world, acting and dealing with men of a strange race and strange morality, and with ends in life far different from his own. Hence the possibility of a conflict both of nationalities and of moralities. The collision, therefore, which supplies the nerve of the play may be stated, in a general form, to be between Christianity and Judaism. But mark! it is not between these religions as dogmatic systems of theology, but as realized in the practical life of men. Antonio is a Christian, not that he goes to church and makes long prayers and daily rehearses the creed; he does none of these things as far as we know; but a general spirit of brotherhood and generosity animates all his actions; a liberality which we may fairly call Christian is ingrained into his very nature, and is the well-spring of his conduct in his dealings with his fellow-men. On the contrary, Shylock exhibits Judaism as it must influence the doings of those who act according to its principle. To be sure, the religious element is brought into more prominence in his character than in Antonio's, but only for the purpose of showing the moral consequences of that system of belief. Shylock carries out in his life the faith that is in him with the utmost logical rigor and bitterness. And here we desire to lay stress upon an important fact. Shakespeare has nowhere in any of his dramas made religion *as such* the principal motive. This was, no doubt, intentional on his part, for no man understood the concrete nature of religion—religion as determining the conduct of mankind—better than he. In this form he uses it continually. But to make men die for an abstract principle of Theology, Shakespeare utterly refused, and he was right. For we all say that religion means nothing unless carried out

in life, and just there Shakespeare seizes it, religion in action. But then in this sphere the religious form vanishes; for a man may be of the highest worth and integrity, and still refuse to conform to the required observances; who can tell the difference between such a man and the most worthy church member in their actions towards their fellow-men? Now the drama represents just this; man in action. Hence, if it be universal, it must take not the religious but the ethical basis, for all men recognize *that*. A number of poets of very high rank have tried to embody a religious theme in the drama, as Calderon, Corneille, and Massinger. But the judgment of mankind has not pronounced these efforts the highest products of the dramatic art. In fact the real religious drama is found in the old miracle-plays, and it has always been considered a great advance in dramatic form, when that kind of plays disappeared into the regular drama. This progress is an historical fact; the old Moraliters with their abstract virtues, their demons and angels, devils and gods—in general, with their wholly external way of representation developed into motives and ends, into freedom, into Shakespeare. For he puts the demon and the angel inside of man, where they belong. No longer is a human being lured on to a deed which he seemingly cannot help, by some irresistible power outside of his own nature. This, then, is the difficulty with the religious drama: in its machinery—or, if you please, in its mediations—the self-determination of man is obscured and often lost. Hence this form of the drama has disappeared with the advancing consciousness of Freedom, and Shakespeare has taken special pains to discard it in all its forms.

But to return. We said that the collision was between Christianity and Judaism, not as dogmatic systems of Theology but as realized in the practical life of men. They are thus internal, subjective, and determine human conduct. It is the conflict of two hostile moralities, and the struggle is ethical rather than religious. We feel that the consciousness of the two men is entirely different, that their notions of right and wrong are in many respects directly opposite. Shylock cannot help being a Jew in character no more than being a Jew in nationality. He is no vulgar villain; he acts according to his principle, according to his end in life; given his

moral basis, his deeds must follow. He is really not a comic character; on the contrary, he belongs rather to tragedy, for he is the bearer of one of the two grand colliding principles, and it is his principle which has gone down in history, and which must again go to the wall in every conflict with the profounder phases of modern spirit. We see the destiny impending over him; but he yields, as the Jews always have done, and is preserved. The poet has thus made him the type of his race, which avoids the life-and-death collision; for, like him, the Jew has lived among all nations without being swallowed up; he possesses that happy admixture of stubbornness and submission, which has kept him from being destroyed on the one hand and from being absorbed on the other. The cause of this strange preservation lies in the nature of the Jewish faith; it is not for all men, but for the peculiar people of God; hence it is not a religion of propagandism, and thus avoids any struggle with dominant systems. Still, it maintains its individuality, and has a tenacity which can only spring from the profoundest conviction, or rather from a complete limitation of Intelligence beyond which the Hebrew mind cannot pass. Thus we see renewed, though in a different form, the contest which took place 1800 years ago, on the plains of Judea—the contest which forms, perhaps, the most important period in history, and upon the result of which our entire modern civilization has turned. No wonder, then, that this play has been so popular, and has said so much to mankind, when the content of the modern world and the momentous struggle for its existence loom up in the background. We cannot help noting again what permanent and universal themes the poet seizes upon as materials for his all-comprehensive genius; for here it is the collision between two of the grandest world-historical epochs, between the old and new dispensation, which lays the imperishable foundation of the play.

But this statement that the collision is between Judaism and Christianity is still abstract, and hence we next ask, What is the content of these two systems of religion, especially in their influence upon the practical life of mankind? What objects do these two men place before themselves, to be attained by their living? in other words, What is their

end in Life? This gives the central point, the germinal unit from which all action springs. Antonio is a merchant, but it is plain that his end in life is not money, nor can it be any Christian's. Antonio's purse is open to all his friends; he is the centre of a jolly crowd of good fellows, though he himself is inclined to be melancholic; in such a position, we can easily see it is not difficult to get rid of money. A deeper phase of his moral nature is his hatred of usury; he has relieved many a poor victim from the clutches of Shylock, and has denounced the meanness and cruelty of the latter on the Rialto with extremest vehemence. He realizes in the highest sense of the expression that man is above property—that is enough to show his Christianity. Money is to him only a means—a means of enjoyment for himself and friends on the one hand, and for helping his fellow-mortals on the other. Antonio is truly merciful; he is the practical embodiment of the holy declaration, "without charity I am nothing." Christianity always insists upon the neighbor, who has the same rights as yourself; he is a person as well as yourself in the thought of universal Reason, or, as Holy Writ saith, "in the sight of God." Nay, more; its cardinal doctrine is mercy,—which means that man, within certain limits, is to be shielded from the consequences of his deeds. Man is a finite being—God made him so—and in so far as he is finite, he cannot be held responsible for the results of his actions. He is ignorant and hence liable to err; Mercy says that he shall not suffer from his mistakes: but he is also weak and hence liable to transgress; Mercy says that he must receive pardon, if the transgression be repented of. Here the conflict arises: Justice demands rigid accountability; it asserts that man must be responsible for all his acts, while mercy tries to shield even the crouching criminal. These reflections, which may seem a little irrelevant, develop the motive for the most celebrated speech in the play, where Portia divinely discourses of mercy:

"The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,
Upon the place beneath; it is twice bless'd;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings:
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the heart of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God.
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,—
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.”

The allusion is plainly to the Lord's prayer, the very heart of Christianity. Thus the poet states directly the conflict between the two religions, and gives the content of the Christian faith in a way that he alone can.

Antonio's mishap was, no doubt, his own fault; he had no business to give such a bond, especially since it seems that his credit was good in Venice and he might have got the money by other means. But his case deserves the commiseration of his fellow-mortals, especially since he made a mistake merely, and did not even commit a transgression. Besides, he probably could not think, with his consciousness, that even the Jew would proceed to such extreme measures. He was himself merciful, and he could not comprehend a monster. But Judaism knows no mercy, at least in its universal sense. God has his own peculiar people; the world is for them and the fulness thereof. Furthermore, the manifestation of God's favor is prosperity; of his wrath, adversity. Hence Shylock well states his end in life to be—Thrift. The acquisition of gain is the highest object of existence, every other end is subordinate. Put a man in the world with this notion, “I am the favorite of the Almighty; the rest of mankind is only so much material to make money out of, which I can use as I please,”—and you have the Jew. It is curious to observe how the poet paints Shylock as penetrated with the morality of the Old Testament. He tells the story of Jacob's deceiving Laban as scriptural proof that his end was justifiable:

“This was the way to thrive and he (Jacob) was blest;
And thrift is blessing, if men steal it not.”

Note that only one exception is made: no stealing, everything else is allowable. The reason is manifest: Theft would

annihilate property, and with the destruction of it his end also must perish, for that end itself is Property. Hence his motto is: Thrift but no Theft. Herein we have the clue to all the deeds and sayings of Shylock. The bigotry, the avarice, the hypocrisy, the hate, even the scoffing speech, all spring from the one source. Of course, the moral nature of man is as it were scooped clean out in such a character. Deception, extortion, even crime, are allowable, and humanity is extinguished in the breast of man.

But there is another contrast between Antonio and Shylock. The scene of this drama is laid in the greatest commercial city of that age, and it represents the business-world. Hence it portrays man in his commercial relations to his fellow-man, and these transactions furnish the basis of a business morality. We hear the buzz of the exchange; we observe the leading question of a mercantile community, "What's the news on the Rialto?" we note with astonishment this centre of information and commercial enterprise, for the ventures and the credit of Antonio are all well-known to Shylock through this medium. This is, no doubt, one of the great elements of the popularity of this play, for the great portion of mankind must always be employed in the production and exchange of the fruits of the earth; thus it appeals directly to business men, and is a picture of the business-world. Furthermore, this is a world of free activity, for each one chooses what branch of business best suits his inclination and character. The calling thus becomes an index of the moral disposition of the man. It is well known that some kinds of business, though acknowledged by law and recognized by the community as necessary, are nevertheless held in disrepute by the great majority of mankind. What callings, then, have these two men respectively chosen? Antonio is a merchant; he exchanges the productions of the world, he knits the nations together by mutual traffic—of course, for a consideration. But there is nothing narrow or mean in his nature; his end, as before stated, is not money, and this frees him from any trace of avarice or illiberality. In fact, his melancholy seems to arise in part from a dissatisfaction with his calling—it cannot satisfy the highest wants of man. Shylock, on the contrary, is a usurer; he takes advantage of the sudden wants of

men to extort their earnings. Hence this class of men were regarded as the enemies of society, ready to draw profit out of any misfortune to the individual or the state. No wonder this business fell into the hands of the Jews, who were persecuted by society, and hence hostile or at least indifferent to it. We shall not now dwell upon that equally unreasonable prejudice against all interest on money which seems to be shared also by Shakespeare. The use of money ought to be worth something as well as the use of anything else. Our age has recognized this fact for the most part, though there still remain upon our statute books some traces of the old spirit, as, for example, the limitation of the rate of interest. The consequence, however, is that in our time the banker has taken the place of the usurer, and money has its price like any other commodity. The bank is now the handmaid of all commercial activity, and supports instead of sapping the enterprise of the country. But it is no wonder that formerly the merchant hated the usurer, for the merchant-prince who carries on a world-commerce is exposed to many unforeseen contingencies, the storm, the rock, the pirate, and sometimes *must* borrow. Hence Antonio's hatred of the Jew lies also in their callings.

But we must hurry on to the consummation of this interesting collision. Shylock, being a Jew, can use the Gentiles for his own end; that end being Thrift, he uses them for making money. This is allowed by the law of Moses, which permits the Hebrews to take usury from the stranger but not from the brother. But Antonio stands in his way; he has the right to employ any means of getting rid of the hateful merchant which does not endanger his own safety—for if he should lose his life in the attempt, that would not be thrifty. The means most consistent with his own safety is the formal side of the Law—he is going to murder Antonio legally. Now Law expresses the Right of the Person in reference to Property; its main *dictum* even at the present time is, "Property is sacred"; and the Jurisprudence of Venice was still more rigid in this respect than that of the present day. Hence the Right of Property comes into conflict with the existence of the Individual. This is illustrated by the well-known example of a starving man stealing a loaf of

bread: is he justified in doing so or not? We see the contradiction—the right to a loaf of bread, on the one hand, against a human life on the other. All of us would say in such a case: Property is the lower, and must be subordinate when it conflicts with humanity. Mercy overrides Justice. But the Jew must remain deaf to such considerations, for his highest end is Property; how, then, can he acknowledge a higher? But Shylock's ground of right is still more devoid of a content than the case just mentioned, for he can get back his Property trebled. No; his bond calls for a pound of flesh; that and nothing else will satisfy him. Thus the collision is narrowed down to a mere empty form of law against the existence of an individual. Law is pushed in this way to the extreme limit of self-contradiction, for Law which was made to protect and preserve mankind has now become the direct instrument of their destruction; is not that self-contradictory? But it is the Law, and Law must have its course, says Portia; only mercy can soften its severity and annul its wrong. Hence her appeal for mercy which we have already quoted. But the Jew cannot relent; the character would be utterly illogical and untrue if he did. The letter of the Law, then, is to be followed with the utmost rigidity; this is the Jew's own basis. "But, hold!" says Portia, "the bond mentions no blood." If you want the letter, you can have it to your heart's content. Portia abandons her first defence, that of mercy, and takes the weapons of the Jew and turns them against him. This contradiction rests upon the fact, that a law, a bond, a contract—yea, language itself—cannot describe the Particular, for they are in their nature general. We all know how cumbersome legal formulas are; with what wearisome detail they try to describe a title, a piece of land, or a testamentary act: it results from this circumstance. Hence if an absolute adherence to the letter is insisted upon, neither Shylock's nor any other bond is possible. Many lawyers have made objection to this point taken by Portia; they say that no court in Christendom would have decided that a pound of flesh did not include the blood, though the bond may not have expressly said so. This may be the case, but it does not affect the truth of Shakespeare's representation. His design was to show how formal Law contradicts itself, and to exhibit

the Jew beaten at his own game. From this moment Shylock subsides; he sees the point and is completely non-plussed. The might of the Form of Law was never more powerfully presented. The judge, the people, and justice itself, are all on the side of one innocent man, yet they are unable to rescue him from the clutches of an odious wretch who has the form alone on his side. Still, the poet must find for us some reconciliation with the Law; it would be most ridiculously inadequate if it did not furnish some means for reaching the Jew. This it does, inasmuch as it is made to seize the crime of Shylock just in its truly vulnerable point—criminal intention. This is Portia's next point against him. He has willed the death of a citizen, of which the punishment is confiscation and death. We have seen this motive lying behind all his actions, notwithstanding his howling for Right and Justice. Still we must not suppose that he was a common villain, an Iago, or Richard, or Edmund. The subjective side was little emphasized by the Jewish faith; if men conformed to Law and Religion, it mattered little about motives. Under the old dispensation, the man who committed the most justifiable homicide had to flee the country, and the person who ate pork was damned. Hence when Shylock is arraigned for his subjective intention, we may fairly assume that this principle lies beyond his consciousness. It is the product of the modern world and Christianity. Still Shylock is saved because he is ready to yield to formal Law when that turns against him; hence the Law cannot well destroy him. This characteristic is the direct antithesis of the modern spirit whose tendency is rather to break down formal Law, to sacrifice it to the Individual. Shylock, however, is punished with a truly poetic justice: avarice loses its money, religious and national bigotry sees the Jewish house of Shylock go down forever by the marriage of the daughter with a Christian.

It is not the design of Shakespeare to make the Law contemptible, but to exhibit its limitation. Even the old Romans recognized this limitation—although theirs was essentially the law-giving consciousness—in the well-known maxim: *Summum jus, summa injuria*. But it has been left to modern Jurisprudence to recognize and embody its own finitude within itself; in other words, to establish a system of mercy.

The pardoning power is lodged in the executive by *law*; thus the highest officer of the state, out of his own heart, out of his own infinite subjectivity, reverses the legal decision, and hence is by Law above Law. The Judge has to administer the formal Law even in its injustice, and therefore he often, after giving a condemnatory sentence, turns around and signs a paper recommending executive clemency. But the Jurisprudence of Venice had not yet recognized this distinction. It was a commercial state, its prosperity depended greatly upon the security of Property, hence the inflexibility of its Law; for the Right of Property was deemed of almost paramount importance. Hence its Law cannot save Antonio, though it can condemn Shylock.

But what if the Jew would still insist upon taking his pound of flesh? Then he must have it, and the play becomes a tragedy. Antonio loses his life by the letter of the Law, and Shylock is executed for murder. But the play cannot admit of this solution. For thus the character of the Jew would be wholly untrue, as we have before stated; nor can the poet allow Antonio to perish for a mere mistake. This would be totally averse to his moral code. Hence the difficulty demands mediation and the conclusion must be happy. The piece is, therefore, neither a tragedy nor a comedy, but a middle species of play, which may be called, for want of a better word, a drama, in a special sense. But we shall not take up these distinctions now; we hope to elaborate them in full at some future time.

Shylock ranks as one of the most perfect characterizations in Shakespeare. How complete in every respect! How vividly does he rise up before us! Not merely his physical appearance but his entire spiritual nature stand forth in the plainest lineaments. In fact, we feel as if we know him better than we could possibly have done in real life. The poet has laid open the most hidden recesses of character, has portrayed him in the most diverse relations with a truth and fulness unapproached and unapproachable. We ask ourselves, whence this completeness, this richness, this concreteness of characterization? If we wish to see the infinite difference upon the same subjects, compare Shylock with the best efforts of other dramatists. Take "*L'Avare*," by Molière. Placed

by the side of Shylock, how meagre and unsatisfactory? Can we get at the ground of this extraordinary superiority? First, we should say that Shylock is something more than mere avarice; he has a deeper motive in his nature, and his greed for gain is only one of its manifestations. It is true that his end in life is Thrift, as before stated; but that end is the offspring of his moral and spiritual being, of his religion. Everything goes back to this centre. Shylock is a Jew, one of the "peculiar people"; in all his actions, this deepest principle of his faith and his consciousness wells out; given the motive, he marches logically to its consequences. Thus we have arrived at an absolute spiritual unity in the man. The second reason for the transcendent excellence of this characterization is the breadth which it exhibits. The activities of Shylock embrace quite the totality of Life; we see him in his family, in business, in the state, in social relations, in morality, in religion. We behold him brought into contact with every essential form of society, and he acts in them, brings his principle to the test through them. Nor is he plunged into them from the outside, but is brought into living relation with them. Hence the concreteness, the perfection, the complete individualization of character. But it is different with L'Avare. How limited is the range of the piece in this respect! Harpagon almost descends to the common miser, cut off from the world, in obscurity, dirt and rags, holding fast to his money-bags. His niggardliness in his household, his tyranny in his family, and an example of his extortionate usury, express quite all that we see of him. This is not Shylock, who is exhibited in many more and also far more important relations, who sees the world and grapples with it in all its essential forms; this is what gives content and concreteness to his character. Hence the Harpagon of Molière is empty, almost like an abstract personification of avarice; in fact, it is a meagre caricature compared with the Shylock of Shakespeare. But it gives occasion to many laughable incidents and situations; this was what Molière wanted; he sought for predicaments, and not for characters.

But here this essay must close. The subordinate personages of the play have hardly been mentioned, though worthy of the highest admiration. Especially the character of Portia

is enticing. One question at least must be noticed: Has not Shakespeare sinned against the highest principle of Art—namely, self-determination—in making Portia's choice of a husband depend upon the merest accident? We answer, no; and it is most interesting to observe what care he has taken to insist upon the right of subjective choice, and with what consummate skill he has turned a purely external incident into an emblem of Free-Will. For the selection of the caskets indicates the character and end of the choosers; thus we understand the nature of their motives, and hence their respective deserts. Therefore the result of their choice is not accidental, but inherent in their character. But a full elaboration of this subject cannot now be entered upon.

EMPIRICAL CERTITUDE.

By JOHN C. THOMPSON.

We conceive and shall attempt to demonstrate that Berkeley's error lies in two mistaken notions; first, that the image or appearance is given in sensation; and secondly, that our minds are so constituted that we are forced to believe in a corresponding reality to the appearance;—both of which are caused by the fundamental fallacy which attributes many separate faculties to the mind, as memory, will, a reasoning power, &c. The conditions of the argument are two propositions, which may be thus expressed:

- (a) Mere consciousness is the fundamental form of all the modes of the thinking activity, and not a special mode of the activity.
- (b) Error can enter the human mind only under cover of an inferred identity.

The second above proposition is intended as a corollary to Descartes' test of certitude, namely, that we have a perfectly clear and distinct idea only of our own existence (*cogito, ergo sum*), and our certainty of any other thing is more or less reliable as it approaches the certainty of our existence.

It will not be questioned that Sensation is the first stage of experience. Sensation, in our sense of the word, is the sim-